

# Making Art as Resistance

## The Psychiatric Patient as Subject

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### Abstract

Examining 20th century “art brut” by James Edward Deeds, Martín Ramírez, Ovaraci, and Clément Fraise produced within psychiatric facilities in America and Europe, this paper argues that these artists enacted transgressive creativity, not only aesthetically but through the materiality of their approaches, thereby resisting what sociologist Erving Goffman terms “total institutionalization.”

**Keywords** art brut, outsider art, process based analysis, psychiatry, institutionalization

This article provides a process-based analysis of four artists (James Edward Deeds, Martín Ramírez, Ovaraci, and Clément Fraise) who were committed to psychiatric institutions in America and Europe in the 1920s and 30s. Despite their distinctive and idiosyncratic visual lexicons, all four artists appropriated materials from their locations to subvert institutional space in acts of transgressive creativity. By recasting their roles in their respective institutions from patients as objects of study to artists as subjects, they actively resisted what sociologist Erving Goffman terms “total institutionalization.” Their artistic production thus communicates a tension between bodily confinement and artistic defiance, revealing the

immanent potentiality in the act of art making. Scrutinizing closely not only their artwork but also the materials used during the creative process, this paper recovers a counter-history on the margins of psychiatry, foregrounding “outsider”<sup>1</sup> art’s agency to interrogate social institutions and aesthetic hierarchies, while also serving as a source of self-preservation and self-production.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault delineates the internment of the irrational through the construction of a social architecture instituted during the Enlightenment that separated and marginalized the “madman” from mainstream society. In his comprehensive history of psychiatry in Western culture, Andrew Scull observes that the push towards segregating “the mad from society” led to a large-scale period of asylum building during the 19th century as “moral treatment” became popular throughout America and Europe (Scull 2015, 190). The 20th century saw another transnational trend in the field of psychiatry as the individual body became the site of biomedical and pharmaceutical forms of control through treatments such as insulin shock treatment, metrazol therapy, electroconvulsive therapy, and, most notoriously, prefrontal leukotomy or lobotomy, the controversial surgery devised by the Portuguese doctor Egas Moniz and popularized in the United States in the 1950’s by Dr. Walter Freeman.

During this latter period, the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman spent time in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC to research “the social world of the hospital inmate” (Goffman 1961, ix) and his observational fieldwork served as the basis of his book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. In this book, Goffman outlines the power dynamics and social hierarchies of what he defines as a “total institution”. He describes how the very architecture of the total institution “through locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors” (Goffman 1961, 4) creates a barrier between institutional space and a privileged outside world that is only available to staff. The body of the inmate is reified as labor and viewed as burden by the staff:

In total institutions, there is a basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff. Inmates typically live in the institution and have restricted contact with the world outside the

walls . . . Staff tends to feel superior and righteous; inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy, and guilty. (Goffman 1961, 7)

A key trait of a total institution is its all-encompassing control over the inmate's time and space. Yet even within total institutions, some still seek and discover ways to assert agency, autonomy, and personhood.

James Edwards Deeds<sup>2</sup> was committed for life in 1936 to State Hospital No. 3 in Nevada, Missouri. Like many asylums, State Hospital No. 3 came out of a transnational movement in mental health care based on moral treatment, which was championed in America by the 18th century doctor Benjamin Rush. Proponents for moral treatment, such as the 19th century reformer Dorothea Dix, viewed the asylum as a humane alternative to the streets, but by the time of Deeds' confinement, many of these Kirkbride institutions were showing signs of deterioration and growing increasingly overcrowded with patients. In 1934, just two years before Deeds was committed, State Hospital No. 3 was investigated after five deaths occurred on the site ("State Hospital Brutality Is Probed" 1934). Deeds was at the institution during a historical moment of transition in the field of mental health care, and his sketches quietly question the movement away from the asylum as a "moral" city and toward biomedical forms of therapy and control.

Using colored pencil, pen, and crayon on scraps of old psychiatric hospital ledger paper used for bookkeeping, Deeds created 283 carefully numbered drawings that invite the viewer into asylum space and time and into his own anachronistic universe. Because these drawings are composed on paper owned by the asylum and bound together into a single volume, it is likely that they were sanctioned by the staff at State Hospital No. 3. Considering this, it is surprising how subversive the content is. The most obvious tension is between the hospital's ownership over the paper and Deeds' artistic reclamation of the space on the page. The name of the hospital and the treasurer are centered on the top each front page which also contains grid lines for calculating expenses, and Deeds often uses the existing lines to guide or frame his portraits or landscapes. He also occasionally even humorously toys with the space on the page

as in drawing No. 123, which includes a small sketch of a tiny finger pointing to the line marked for address.

As this example illustrates, Deeds' sketches are playful in tone while also expressing nostalgic fantasies of a halcyon, idyllic past. While the well-known Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli foregrounds perception and interiority, Deeds' works express a fascination with the external world, both in and outside the asylum walls. He animates human figures, places, animals, vehicles, and objects with dynamism and personality. In his character portraits, Deeds constructs a community of interdependent individuals in provincial town drama: the state attorney, the professor, the judge. Yet alongside the more respectable figures are the deviants and outsiders: the rebel girl, the tiger lady, the deer boy. By placing these portraits within picture frames (oftentimes including hooks for hanging them), he emphasizes art as artifice, and one can almost imagine his work decorating the walls of State Hospital No. 3.

His works also show a preoccupation with wordplay, calling attention to the instability of both visual and verbal communication. For instance, he has a clever affinity for translating verbal homophones into visual puns. A portrait labeled *Deer Boy* offers a literal interpretation of this term of endearment in an illustration of a young man with antlers projecting from his head. In the imagination of Deeds, a tiger can be an animal, a woman (No. 99 *Tiger Girl*), a man (No. 62 *Tiger Jent*), or even a sports team as in No. 205, which includes a team of Tigers in their baseball uniforms. Interestingly, State Hospital No. 3 had a baseball team made up of staff members during the first half of the 20th century (*State Hospital No. 3* 2013, 49), and some of Deeds' sketches seem to look back toward a time when the institution was more integrated into the social life and culture of the town.

His most intriguing wordplay, however, is the word ECTLECTRIC in drawing No. 197. In this piece, ECT, an abbreviation for electroconvulsive therapy, is scrambled into the word 'electric,' in a jarring neologism. This dark heading accompanies a seemingly benign drawing of a woman, but based on the verbal wit that can be found throughout his work, and the occurrence of ECT in other drawings, it is unlikely that this misspelling is accidental and in its anachronistic tension, between the buttoned Victorian appearance of the subject with her bouquet of colorful flowers and the

darker connotations of the title, this piece subtly yet powerfully interrogates biomedical therapy.

Martín Ramírez was born in Jalisco, Mexico in 1895 and traveled to the United States in 1925 to seek work. While he initially worked on the railroad, it is likely that he struggled to find employment during the Great Depression. In 1931, he was committed to Stockton State Hospital. In his early days at Stockton, Ramírez tried to escape several times before he was eventually moved to DeWitt State Hospital. Unlike Stockton and State Hospital No. 3, which were both Victorian buildings modeled on the Kirkbride plan, DeWitt hospital was a newly constructed army barracks that had been used during World War II. In this facility, where he would reside for the rest of his life, Ramírez made art out of necessity and his process reflects an intense focus and a profound commitment to his craft.

Ramírez's work resists total institutionalization through his creative and resourceful use of found materials in an environment in which his material possessions were controlled, especially during the period before he received acknowledgement and support for his work by Dr. Tarmo Pasto. The possessions available to a patient in DeWitt State Hospital were limited by precise rules and regulations. According to the Visitors Guide from 1954, Dewitt State Hospital recommended the following list of items for male patients:

- 3 Pair Washable Trousers
  - 3 Shirts
  - 3 Suits of Underwear
  - 6 Pairs of Socks
  - 3 Pairs of Pajamas
  - 6 Handkerchiefs
  - 1 Coat Sweater
  - Comb, toothbrush, toilet articles and writing material.
- (Department of Mental Hygiene 1954)

Goffman describes the effects of this type of dispossession on the construction of self within a total institution: "The personal possessions of an individual are an important part of the materials out of which he builds a self, but as an inmate the ease with which he can be managed by staff is likely to increase with the degree to which he is dispossessed" (Goffman 1961, 78). Yet in Dewitt State Hospital,

Ramírez resisted artistic dispossession by assembling found objects and repurposing them for artistic uses. These included a diverse range of ephemera such as “discarded nurses’ notes, cigarette rolling papers, magazines, greeting cards, candy-box wrappers, newspapers, book pages, flattened paper cups, and examining-table cover sheets--which he pasted together with homemade glue made from potato starch, bread dough, and his own saliva” (Davis 2010, 21). He used a tongue depressor to draw lines and melted crayon on his radiator to soften the wax to make it more flexible for his work (Davis 2010, 20-21). He hid his works to protect them from being damaged or stolen and worked painstakingly, creating drawings that present a profound narrative of the mind under internal and external constraints. Wayne Thiebaud observed Ramírez in the act of making, noting how the artist used matches and other materials to create a palette of colors: “I remember him coloring the cheeks of one of his Madonnas with such a match, it created a nice kind of pink for the cheeks. Ramírez also used various kinds of food from the kitchen for his colors and newspaper illustrations that he would chew and make into a kind of colored saliva” (Thiebaud 2008, 11). Although spit often connotes destruction and defacement, Ramírez exploits the productive potential in saliva, not only to produce color but to create a paste that he used to expand the scale of his work. For example, his piece *Untitled (Ten Trains)* created between 1960-63 is of an ambitious scale, reaching 50.8 cm x 2.9 m.

Like Deeds’ sketches, the works of Ramírez exhibit a fascination with order and recursive patterns. While Deeds’ subjects are enclosed within picture frames, Ramírez’s horseback riders – and other figures reminiscent of the culture and landscape of his youth – are centered on platforms and in archways. Victor Espinosa, who has done the most substantial work recovering Ramírez’s biography, has written extensively about Ramírez’s Mexican background and situates Ramírez’s oeuvre within three key events that influenced his life and work: the Mexican Revolution, The Cristero War, and the Great Depression in America. Espinosa suggests that for Ramírez, art “became a prime means for preserving his identity, keeping alive his memory and trying to give sense and order to an external and internal world in crisis” (Espinosa 2010, 28).

Many of Ramírez’s works obliquely explore memory, yet exist in a liminal space between the past and the present, in a purgatory of



the mind, and the iterative formations create an overwhelming and powerful sense of containment. His tunnels, a common motif in his work, evoke motion and stasis simultaneously, transporting and trapping the viewer into sequences of recursive loops and dark recesses. When looking at a piece like *Untitled (Four Horizontal Rows of Tunnels)*, one can feel the emotional and gravitational pull of dense, dark, crypt-like spaces. Tunnels suggest escape or connection: access to the outside, but Ramírez's tunnels disconnect and isolate, exposing the darkness of the inside. Trains also figure prominently in his work, but transportation appears to exist outside of time in an eternal tension between arrival and departure. While the train seems to imply hope, a means of escape; it also has darker connotations for as Brooke Anderson observes, "The railroad played a key role in connecting the spiritual opulence of his early milieu to the vacant environment of his later life" (Anderson 2010, 25) These problems of connection are foregrounded in Ramírez's works, which portray space as an illusory but real impediment to human encounter. It is only through the act of making that the artist can find respite from the haunting memories of the past and the constraints over the body in the present.

While Deeds and Ramírez appropriated found objects and ephemera to quietly question confinement, the Danish artist Overtaci reimagined asylum space in both sanctioned and unsanctioned acts of aesthetic transgression. Of the four artists in this study, Overtaci was arguably the most successful in asserting and gaining both artistic and personal autonomy (though not without struggle) while at the psychiatric facility in Risskov. Hospitalized for sixty-six years (including a brief period at Dalstrup), Overtaci was admitted to the hospital as Louis Marcussen and took on various names, identities, and genders throughout her life.<sup>3</sup> The most well-known is Overtaci, which according to Eddie Danielsen was a creative spelling of over-tosse or "uber loony" (Danielsen 2015, 7).

A sculptor, painter, and poet, Overtaci constructed and painted papier-mâché female figures, decorated her room with her work, and even painted her own bed, staking an artistic claim on asylum space. Overtaci's works challenge the binary between private and public space and play with the tension between defacement and decoration. While in Dalstrup, she created one of her most irreverent public works, when she was commissioned to paint the chapel

there. After painting the crucifixion, she later returned in stealth and transformed the piece into a naked female figure. Regarding the work, Overtaci later observed to the psychiatrist Johannes Nielsen “Jeg blomstrede kapellet i Dalstrup og alt er vist nok skrabet ned.”<sup>4</sup>

Another preoccupation in Overtaci’s oeuvre is flight, which is explored through visual tropes such as winged creatures, birds, butterflies, and even helicopters. In her visions recorded by the psychiatrist Johannes Nielsen, Overtaci also refers to herself frequently as a bird or a butterfly. One particularly striking vision dictated to Nielsen involves her transmigratory experience as a butterfly. The butterfly lives in a beautiful palace, but is asked to give up this freedom to descend into a prison and “console the prisoners” (Overtaci 2005, 38). An unnamed woman explains the butterfly’s mission: “Little butterfly, down under there is a prison, the palace has a reverse side and in that is a prison. All the conscientious objectors are imprisoned there, and there are certainly many of them” (Overtaci 2005, 38). The butterfly agrees to descend into the prison, but it provokes great “unrest” within the facility. The butterfly’s commitment to radical beauty within the prison parallels Overtaci’s own life of artistic transgression within Dalstrup and Risskov. According to Eddie Danielsen, Overtaci desired to completely transform asylum architecture with a “vision” that “unfolded further into the walls of the wards, in ideas of a transformation of the entire hospital, maybe the entire world” (Danielsen 2015, 21)

Despite Overtaci’s many public acts of creative transgression, she also chose to keep some of her creative work private. In the introduction to the book of poetry, *Overtaci’s Secrets: Poems to the Future*, Nielsen tells the story of how he discovered a manuscript of poems in the head of the sculpture Puppapasta, one of Overtaci’s papier-mâché dolls, while he was in the process of restoring the piece. This act of artistic self-concealment establishes a defiant and defined boundary between Overtaci’s public and private selves, and is especially important within the culture of the asylum, where the self is impinged upon through biomedical treatments and the prescribed codes of the institution. Written in Spanish, the poetry is further encrypted by another one of Overtaci’s personas. Revealing much about Overtaci’s interiority, the poems move between dark and light, delving into themes of war, fear, and suffering and celebrating beauty, love, and art. In one poem, the speaker urges the



audience: "Create or build / All of you, / Hope in pictures / In art / In poetry / In text." (Ovartaci 2006, 13). Like in many of Ovartaci's visions and visual works, hope is found through spiritual surrender to the feminine, which, for her, is the source of art making and aesthetic experience.

While Ovartaci's narrative shows a movement toward artistic self-determination and social recognition, the story of Clément Fraisse is a tragic one of isolation. According to Sarah Lombardi, Fraisse was born in Lozère, France and was committed to the Saint-Alban hospital after an arson attempt on the family farm. Upon expressing violent behaviors within the facility and enacting multiple escape attempts, he was interned within a small wooden cell from 1930-31. During this time, he used several makeshift tools, including a broken spoon handle and the handle of his chamber pot, to carve a narrative of isolation into the walls around him (Lombardi 2012, 52).

As Goffman shows, the codes and rules within the asylum serve to control the daily life of patients through a complex, hierarchical social order established and maintained by staff. Solitary confinement, however, further segregates patients from social contact, silencing or even erasing those who fail to submit to the norms of the institution. Yet Fraisse resisted social annihilation by repurposing the only tools he had available from the institution to carve his presence into the very walls that contained him, reshaping asylum architecture from the inside out in an act of aesthetic defiance and defacement. The wooden wall consists of approximately 150 rectangular carvings. The original planks dictate the width of each individual panel, but the length of each section varies according to Fraisse's design. The most common pattern is the double wheel which fills the space on all 27 blocks of the bottom two rows, and is featured elsewhere throughout the piece. Another important motif is the abstracted human figure, which is more prominent in the upper rows. Shifts between surface scratches and deep cuts into the wood can be discerned, perhaps reflecting changes in emotion, but also indicating shifts in materials as he moved between the tools available to him. The expansiveness of Fraisse's vision, both in terms of its size (1.70 x 3.83 m) and its ambition stands in stark contrast to the enclosure and circumscription of his body within this physical space.

Despite the documentation of harrowing conditions in the 1930's, Saint-Alban hospital became a site for rethinking psychiatry during and after World War II and the birthplace of what would later be termed institutional psychotherapy, a movement in the field linking political and psychological liberation spearheaded by François Tosquelles. According to the scholar Camille Robcis, Tosquelle believed that "psychiatry and politics shared a similar goal: the possibility of bringing about a form of true freedom through the 'disoccupation of the mind'" (Robcis 2016, 212). Although Fraisse left the facility in 1945, the wooden room he carved was preserved by Roger Gentis and another doctor from Saint-Alban, and is currently on display at the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland.

While solitary confinement severely circumscribed Fraisse's physical mobility, it opened a space for divergent and unorthodox forms of creativity. This is one of the dark paradoxes in the complicated historical narrative of institutionalization. Institutions that segregated those diagnosed with mental illness from society at large also became sites where some patients discovered their talent as artists and expanded their craft, removed from the capitalist constraints of daily life. This is especially the case for Ramírez and Overtaci, who were both encouraged by psychiatrists who took interest in their lives and work. According to Goffman: "Every total institution can be seen as a kind of dead sea in which little islands of vivid, encapturing activity appear" (Goffman 1961, 69-70). The art produced in institutions provides one such site of hope and deserves further scrutiny not only for its historical significance but for what it says about the transgressive power of art-making and aesthetic experience.

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### Notes

- 1 While "art brut" has become a broad label for a diverse range of artwork, the term's origins are rooted in the French artist Jean Dubuffet's fascination with the creative processes and practices of those relegated to the margins of society, many of whom were institutionalized in prisons and psychiatric hospitals. In 1972, Roger Cardinal coined the label "outsider art" to identify this body of work, which now includes

artists who in many ways are as different as they are similar, from the spiritualist Madge Gil to the subversive Thornton Dial, from the reclusive, fantastical Henry Darger to the itinerant street evangelist, Sister Gertrude Morgan.

- 2 The story of how Deeds' work was discovered is quite remarkable. When a bound book of drawings was first found by a teenage boy in 1970 in a trashcan in Springfield, Missouri and shared with a local historian almost forty years later, little was known about the artist behind this intriguing collection of work. The artist and collector Harris Diamant eventually purchased the book and affectionately nicknamed the artist "The Electric Pencil" based on one of the sketches. Diamond searched for more information about the artist but could not figure out the identity, until a niece of the artist recognized one of the drawings featured in a published article.
- 3 Because Overtaci attempted self castration and penis amputation and later sought and received a sex change operation, I refer to Overtaci as "she" in the body of this text, even though this is not an adequate label for Overtaci's complex gender identity. In *Overtaci: Pictures, Thoughts, and Visions of an Artist*, Overtaci speaks of being a woman, a man, a girl, a boy, a puma, a bird, a butterfly, etc taking on multiple and fluid gender identities.
- 4 Of the artists studied here, Overtaci provides the most insight into the inner workings of her creative process. Through a profound relationship built with the psychiatrist Johannes Nielsen, Overtaci's personal reflections on her art were compiled and recorded. In these short pieces, Overtaci discusses the significance of each painting or sculpture, occasionally addressing the material conditions of the piece's production, but more frequently delving into an intricate and complex visionary universe where she inhabits multiple times, spaces, and various human and nonhuman bodies.